The Socio-Economic Impact of Violent Extremism on Women in Peshawar

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Abstract

The prevalence of Violent Extremism (VE) and its socioeconomic impact on women significantly threatens society and national security by destabilizing communities, promoting radicalization, and weakening social cohesion, particularly in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. The legacies of the Soviet-Afghan War and the War on Terror have deepened societal fault lines marked by violence, political indifference, conservative traditions, and strong religious influences. Despite enhanced government efforts against VE, the specific challenges faced by women, who bear a disproportionate burden, remain largely overlooked. By using a mixed-methods approach and sequential explanatory design, this research focuses on the socio-economic impact of VE on women in Peshawar, examining how structural inequalities, lack of access to education, economic marginalization, and patriarchal norms contribute to their vulnerability. Additionally, women's marginalization and economic disenfranchisement increase their vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups—a critical and often underexamined issue in Pakistan. This vulnerability undermines societal structures and perpetuates cycles of extremism, hindering the state's ability to achieve long-term stability in the region. The study proposes an "Integrated Resilience Framework (IRF)" with two key dimensions: Social and Institutional Measures, and Behavioral and Ideological Approaches. The IRF emphasizes empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and their inclusion in the decision-making process. By integrating these gender-sensitive strategies into the CVE policy framework, this research aims to reduce the impact of VE on women and strengthen their role as agents of societal resilience and positive change.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, gender equality, community engagement, Security, Women, Vulnerability, Peshawar

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1. Introduction

In the face of global challenges that transcend borders, extremism is a formidable obstacle impacting societies worldwide. However, the complexities deepen when addressing this issue in countries where a myriad of challenges including political, religious, and ethnic diversity, coupled with security concerns, poor law enforcement, and socio-economic disparities, provide fertile ground for the spread of extremism. Defining extremism, especially its violent form, is challenging due to the lack of a universally agreed definition. Despite this, nations and international organisations have attempted to articulate the concept of violent extremism, emphasizing the need to differentiate between extremism and its violent component that may escalate into terrorism. This differentiation is vital as it impacts security and challenges the internal cohesion of the country.

Pakistan, a Muslim-majority nation with a population of 241.49 million and a strategically significant geographical location, sitting at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, renders it a crucial player in global trade and commerce.[1] Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan's third-largest province, shares a porous border with Afghanistan and has a strong Pashtun cultural influence.

The background of violent extremism in Pakistan, particularly in the city of Peshawar, KP, is deeply intertwined with historical conflicts, geopolitical dynamics, and governance. Peshawar's proximity to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has made it vulnerable to the spillover effects of regional conflicts, creating an environment that has in many ways facilitated the spread of extremist ideologies.

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[1] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Results of 7th Population and Housing Census-2023*, https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Press%20Release.pdf

Ethnic and religious differences, along with socio-economic disparities, have provided a recruitment ground for extremists and terrorists. Pakistan's involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s and the post-9/11 global war on terror has led to an array of challenges, and violent extremism has emerged as a persistent concern demanding immediate attention for the well-being of society. Additionally, the prevalence of a culture of violence in the form of hate speech, sectarian and minority-related violence, aggressive behavior, intolerance, and politico-religious extremism has somewhat added to the acceptance of violence as a normal way of life and thinking.[2]

Pakistan, over the years, has undertaken a number of initiatives to combat terrorism and violent extremism. including military operations against militant groups such as Rah-e-Nijat, Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad.[3] Pakistan has also implemented counter-terrorism measures like the establishment of National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), National Action Plan (NAP), madrassa reforms, Paigham-i-Pakistan and National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG) 2018.[4]

Despite the diverse nature of these initiatives, terrorism persists in Pakistani society. It is evident, therefore, that further initiatives and reforms are necessary to meet the challenge posed by terrorism and extremism in the region. Among such possible new initiatives, it will be crucial to address the overlooked gender dimension of the problem. Tazeen Ali et al. in their study, reveal serious gender inequalities and human rights violations against women in Pakistani society. The

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[2] Mossarat Qadeem, "Peace Education: A Remedy for Preventing Violent Extremism in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2021): 6, https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ Vol-III-Issue-II-July-Dec-2021.pdf.

[3] Ops Zarb-e-Azb was conducted by Pakistan Armed Forces against militant groups (15 June 2014 – 22 February 2017) and Ops Radd-ul-Fasaad was initiated in support of local Law Enforcement Agencies to disarm and eliminate terrorist sleeper cells/hideouts (Feb 2017 – Jul 2024)

[4] NACTA, Government of Pakistan, National *Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines 2018*.

unequal gender roles were perceived as static and enforced by structures embedded in society. Women routinely face various challenges, including severe restrictions on their autonomy, gender-based violence, limited access to education and employment opportunities, and diminished participation in the decision-making process.[5]

Studies on extremism in Pakistan often adopt a distant, security-focused approach, concentrating on state actions while overlooking the impact on women. Moreover, the absence of gender-inclusive and localized approaches in CVE policies sidelines women and minorities, hampering the development of comprehensive and successful policies. This indifference perpetuates systemic inequalities, worsening the socio-economic challenges faced by women, particularly in a region marked by decades of the war on terror. Peshawar's experience with violent extremism and gender biases serves as a classical case study, providing insights into broader challenges faced by women across Pakistan. Despite efforts from both the government and civil society, responses to extremism remain reactive, short-term and inconsistent, lacking crucial political and societal backing. As a result, the task of attaining a lasting resolution and cultivating a peaceful society remains a formidable challenge.

This study investigates the socio-economic impact of violent extremism on women in Peshawar, a region significantly affected by instability and conflict. By conducting a detailed survey among local women, the research aims to uncover the multifaceted effects of extremism on their daily lives. Previous studies have highlighted the general consequences of violent extremism, but a focused

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[5] Tazeen S. Ali, Gunilla Krantz, Rozina Gul, Nargis Asad, Eva Johansson, and Ingrid Mogren, "Gender Roles and Their Influence on Life Prospects for Women in Urban Karachi, Pakistan: A Qualitative Study," *Global Health Action* 4 (November 2, 2011): 7448, https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v4i0.7448.

examination of its impact on women in Peshawar remains largely underexplored. This research not only fills this gap but also emphasizes the importance of understanding gender-specific experiences and challenges. The insights gained are crucial for developing effective policies and interventions tailored to support and empower women in such conflict-affected areas.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The term extremism has its roots in the Latin word "extremus," which means far from the center, farthest point, or outermost. In a literal sense, an extreme behavior or idea is one that is not in conformity with the mainstream way of thinking, particularly in the political and social domain.[6]

Safdar Sial and Tanveer Anjum argue that "extremism emanates from entrenched ideological perspectives and behaviors that foster a mindset of superiority over others." It also arises from the clash between the state's ideology and prevailing belief systems, social, political and economic inequalities, as well as major powers' divergent interests and violent policies.[7] The regulations of Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020 define extremism as "the violent, vocal, or active opposition to fundamental values of the state of Pakistan including the security, integrity or defense of Pakistan, public order, decency or morality, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs."[8]

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[6] Josie Ryan, "What Language Tells Us About Changing Attitudes to Extremism," *The Conversation*, August 31, 2017, https://theconversation.com/what-language-tellsus-about-changing-attitudes-to-extremism.

[7] Safdar Sial and Tanveer Anjum, "Jihad, Extremism and Radicalization: A Public Perspective," *PIPS* (April 2010), https://pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/119.pdf

[8] Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (Government of Pakistan), *The Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020.*

Various states and institutions have formulated their own interpretations of violent extremism, as there is no communal definition of the term. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines violent extremism as "the beliefs and actions of individuals who endorse or employ violence to attain ideological, religious, or political objectives." The Government of Pakistan, in its National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (NCEPG-2018), broadly identifies extremism as having absolute belief in one's truth with an ingrained sense of self-righteousness, which enables the holder of belief to grow a judgmental attitude towards other people's beliefs followed by intolerance that is likely to be accompanied with violence. This violence is also driven by the aim to advance social, political, and economic goals.[9]

Violent extremists typically hold a firm conviction in their perceived truth, accompanied by a self-righteous attitude that breeds intolerance towards opposing beliefs. This intolerance may escalate into acts of violence against individuals or communities that are perceived as obstacles to achieving their objectives. Such violence is often driven by a desire to impose ideological dominance and may impact various aspects of societal structure, including social, political and economic spheres.

The theoretical view of extremism encompasses various perspectives from different social science disciplines, fostering ongoing debates for a deeper understanding. Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel,[10] explores how individuals form and maintain a sense of belonging to a group. The theory highlights three key psychological processes: social categorization, social

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[9] NACTA, Government of Pakistan, *National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines 2018,* page 9

[10] Henry Tajfel (22 June 1919 – 3 May 1982) was a Polish social psychologist, best known for his pioneering work on the cognitive aspects of prejudice and social identity theory.

comparison and social identification.[11] This concept has been utilized to explain the emergence of far-right extremism across European nations, particularly in Germany, France and the United Kingdom, where groups such as neo-Nazi organisations, anti-immigrant factions and white supremacist movements exhibit these characteristics. Additionally, it has been applied to comprehend the complexities of violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa, where jihadist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq & Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda capitalize on religious and ideological identities. These groups foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among their followers through the processes of social categorization, comparison and identification.[12]

The Patriarchal Theory connects societal power structures and gender norms to VE. It describes a social system in which men hold dominant positions in political leadership, moral authority and social privilege. The term "patriarchy" literally means "rule of the father."[13] Adopting a gender-sensitive approach that challenges traditional norms and promotes women's empowerment is essential to countering the socio-economic consequences of violent extremism. For instance, in regions such as Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan and parts of Africa, where patriarchal structures are deeply entrenched, women face heightened marginalization and vulnerability, making them potential targets for extremist recruitment.

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[11] Anders Strindberg, "Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism," *FOI Report FOI-R--5062—SE,* December 2020, https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5062--SE

[12] Andreas Beelmann, "A Social-Developmental Model of Radicalization: A Systematic Integration of Existing Theories and Empirical Research," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14 (March 2021), https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3778

[13] Pernilla Stammler Jalliff, "10 Patriarchal Examples," *Helpful Professor (blog),* September 16, 2023, https://helpfulprofessor.com/patriarchy-examples/

Additionally, the Model of Relative Deprivation, based on Samuel Stouffer's[14] concept, offers insights into the growth of extremism. For example, in Sri Lanka, marginalized Tamil women, experiencing socio-economic disparities, were driven to join the Tamil Tigers insurgency due to their perceived lack of opportunities and resources. Similarly, the model applies to understanding socio-economic disparities fueling extremism in Pakistan, where women from deprived backgrounds, lacking access to education and employment opportunities, become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups advocating radical ideologies.

The Model of Relative Deprivation posits that "individuals become frustrated and potentially become extremist when they perceive a significant gap between their expectations or aspirations and their actual circumstances."[15] Both the Patriarchal Theory and the Relative Deprivation Theory will be utilized in this article to examine the role of women in the context of violent extremism.

3. Literature Review

In the term *socioeconomic*, the 'socio' aspect focuses on human behavior and relationships, encompassing interactions with others and family structures, and the 'economic' aspect relates to the financial matters like income and finances. Socio-economics serves as a tool to dissect and comprehend the intricate connections between social and economic facets, influencing various aspects of society, including individuals' well-being, opportunities and overall quality of life."[16] Violent extremists may exploit socio-economic problems to recruit

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[14] Samuel Andrew Stouffer (June 6, 1900 – August 24, 1960) was a prominent American sociologist and developer of survey research techniques. His work is mostly based on the question 'How does one measure an attitude?'
[15] Ben Janse, "Relative Deprivation Theory by Garry Runciman," *Toolshero,* May 14, 2024, https://www.toolshero.com/sociology/relative-deprivation-theory/.
[16]*Vocabulary Dictionary*, s.v. "Socioeconomic," https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/socioeconomic.

followers or justify violence by promising material benefits, social justice, or economic change. Analyses of socio-economic status often uncover disparities in resource access as well as issues of privilege, power and control within the society.[17]

The annual "World Economic Forum Report 2023" on "Global Gender Gaps" benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Pakistan ranks 142nd out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index.[18] Numerous UN Security Council resolutions have recognized that violent extremism has gender-specific dimensions, such as those outlined in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288) and UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015).[19] Asma Shakir Khawaja emphasizes that traditionally, the notion of 'security' has been associated with masculine traits throughout history. Consequently, security matters and their associated concerns are predominantly overseen by male members of society. This dynamic results in a lack of gender perspective in security policy-making globally, from broad strategies to specific actions. Despite women constituting nearly half of the world's population, their voices and perspectives are often overlooked in these crucial decision-making processes. Recognizing the significant presence of women in society, it becomes imperative to ensure their representation and inclusion in security policy formulation.[20]

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[17]*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. "Socioeconomic Status," https://dictionary.apa.org/socioeconomic-status.

[18] "Pakistan ranks 142 out of 146 countries in WEFS Global Gender Gap Report," *Dawn*, June 21,2023, https://www.dawn.com/news/1760949; https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

[19]UN Meeting and Press Release, October 15, 2015, https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc12076.doc.htm

[20] Asma Shakir Khawaja, "Women in Security Policy-Making: A Case Study of Pakistan." *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2017): 90–107, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48535988.

In Pakistan, the socio-economic impacts of VE on women in Peshawar are wide-ranging and complex, like difficulties in accessing education and employment opportunities due to the pervasive threat of extremism, resulting in limited economic empowerment and social mobility. Additionally, the fear of violence and coercion may restrict their freedom of movement and participation in public life, further exacerbating their socio-economic marginalization.

Bushra Khaliq describes in her research that "in Khyber Paktunkhwa (KP), VE is utmost severe, and women are on the front lines of warfare. They are the widows, victims, and survivors of the suicide bomb blasts, the displaced and the traumatized".[21] In another research, Mossarat Qadeem argues that VE impacts women's mobility, access to education and health facilities, and ability to care for their families. She argues that women alone are peace builders, and joining together can transform the values, thinking, and the culture of the region.[22] Sarah Chatellier and Shabana Fayyaz referring Isobel Coleman points out that "while many women are well educated, economically independent, and politically active, feudal and tribal practices still control the lives of tens of millions of Pakistani women."[23] They further highlight that by placing a heavy emphasis on women's honor, religious extremists have increasingly limited their rights, mobility, and their access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, local Jirgas (a gathering of elders) that serve as justice-dispute mechanisms in many parts of the country are largely discriminatory towards women: "purdah, child marriage,

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[21] Bushra Khaliq, "Rising Extremism, War on Terrorism and Women's Lives in Pakistan," *International Viewpoint*, February 2010, www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/womens-participation-transforming- conflict-and-violent-extremism
[22] Mossarat Qadeem, "Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan*," Centre for Women, Peace and Security,* 2018, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104035/1/Qadeem_engendering_extremism_women_preventing_published.pdf
[23] Isobel Coleman, *Under the Crescent Moon: Pakistan in Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2010), 128-130.

and 'karo kari' in which the rape, maiming, or even killing of a woman suspected of having unsanctioned contact with a man are not uncommon in the countryside".[24] Significant gender biases in Pakistan have led to widespread economic and educational disparities. Despite initiatives to address these issues, systemic barriers persist, with the Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-23 reporting a literacy rate of 73% for males compared to just 51% for females. The gap is even wider in rural areas, where cultural and socio-economic factors further restrict girls' access to education.[25]

Saadia argues that in regions like KP, where the social norms, economic context and political participation of women are on the lower side, the women's empowerment and development have not been effective and visible. Due to the patriarchal nature, socio-cultural conditions and feudalistic structures, women have been marginalized and restricted to participate in communal activities.[26]

In another study, Muhammad Junaid points out that "women in Peshawar typically encounter four socio-cultural impediments, including lack of mobility, dependence on male members, and fulfilment of domestic responsibilities and their unacceptability as earners."[27] Growing violent extremism in the region has only compounded women's marginalization. Overall, the reviewed literature

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[24] Sarah Chatellier and Shabana Fayyaz, "Women Moderating Extremism in Pakistan," The Institute for Inclusive Security, August
2012, https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/women-moderating-extremism-in-pakistan/
[25] "Gender disparities in education: A persistent challenge in Pakistan," *The News*, June 8, 2024, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1198105-gender-disparities-in-education-a-persistent-challenge-in-pakistan
[26] Saadia and Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, "Socio-Economic Impediments to Women Development and Empowerment in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," *Pakistan Journal of Social Research* 1 (2019): 18–24, https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v1i01.4
[27] Muhammad Junaid, Syed Shah, and S. Shah, "Socio-Cultural Impediments to Pashtun Women Entrepreneurs in Peshawar, Pakistan: A Narrative Approach," *Global Management Journal for Academic & Corporate Studies 5,* no. 1 (2015)

emphasizes the widespread presence of violent extremism in the society and its significant socio-economic impact on women. After analyzing different factors, key impacts have been grouped into six main themes as shown in Figure 1.
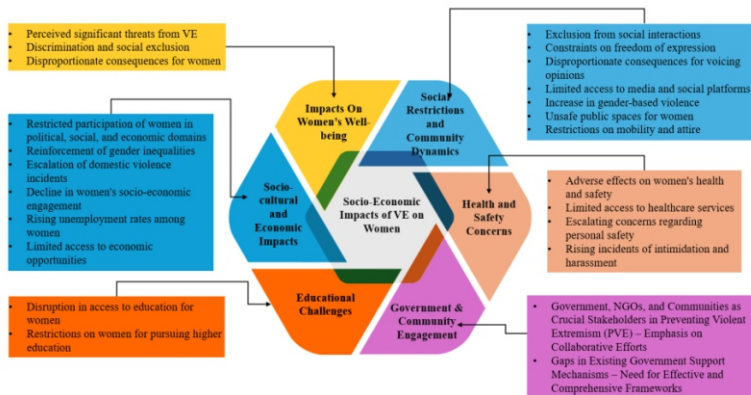

Figure 1: Socio-Economic Impacts of VE on women

4. Research Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach and sequential explanatory design. To conduct the survey, the guidelines published in "Surveys and Countering Violent Extremism: A Practitioner Guide"[28] were consulted.

This research uses thematic analysis and validates the framework with a quantitative questionnaire. A comprehensive literature review was carried out to identify themes for socio- economic impacts of VE on women. Identified themes were further scrutinized by close-ended questionnaire, designed to collect quantifiable data on women's experiences and perceptions of violent extremism's socio-economic impacts. The structured questionnaire was developed with

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[28] Matthew B. L. Nanes, *Surveys and Countering Violent Extremism: A Practitioner's Guide* (The Asia Foundation, Australian Government, 2018), 66.

predefined response options, ensuring consistency and ease of statistical analysis to determine the perception of impacts. The finalized questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to a sample of 123 women from Peshawar, all aged 18 years and above. The survey targeted diverse respondents, including university students, women in various job roles, and women managing households. The collected data was analyzed using univariate descriptive statistics to quantify the prevalence of socio-economic impact of VE. Ethical considerations include respecting participants' anonymity and dignity, recognizing their diverse experiences, and ensuring voluntary, non-coercive participation; participants were given the option to refuse or answer any question.

5. Result and Discussion

The analysis of the data collected reveals critical insights into the socio-economic impact of VE on women in Peshawar. In subsequent paragraphs, the results of data collection are discussed in detail.

a)   Impact of VE on Women's Well-being

The impact of VE on women in Peshawar is a significant societal concern, with a direct threat to their well-being. The survey results affirm the significance of this issue in the community. A total of 3 survey questions explored women's perception of the issue.
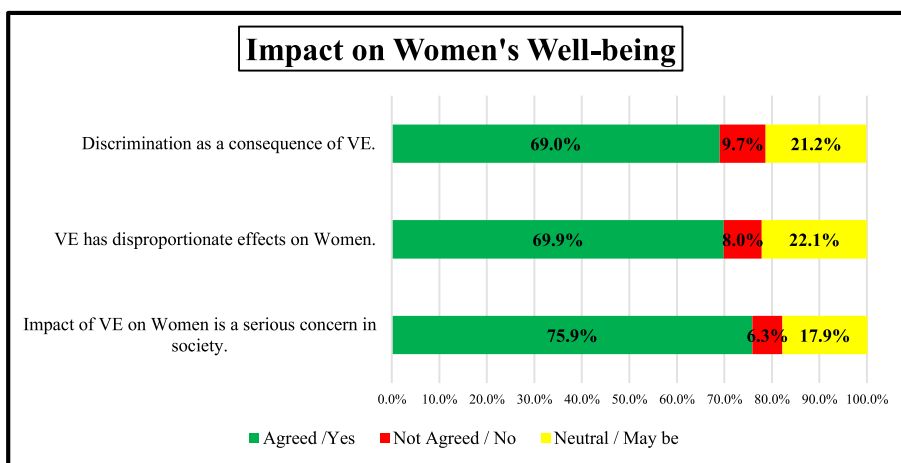
Figure 2: Results of Questions about Impact on Women's Well-being

A large number (75.9%) of respondents believe that the impact of VE on women is a significant concern and a notable threat to the society. Many (69.9%) respondents feel that women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of VE. A significant number (69%) of respondents think that discrimination against women, girls, and marginalized groups is a consequence of VE in the society. The findings highlight how VE disproportionately affects women, causing discrimination and marginalization. To address this, it is crucial to improve the security situation, promote economic empowerment, raise community awareness, and involve women in peacebuilding. Collaboration with civil society and the creation of targeted policies are also essential to mitigating these effects.

b)   Socio-cultural and Economic Impact of VE

Socio-cultural norms influenced by extremist ideologies have significantly restricted women's participation in political, social and

economic spheres, perpetuating gender disparities. VE has reduced women's involvement in socio-economic activities, increasing unemployment rates in affected areas and limiting access to economic opportunities. The results of five survey questions related to sociocultural and economic impacts are listed in Figure 3.
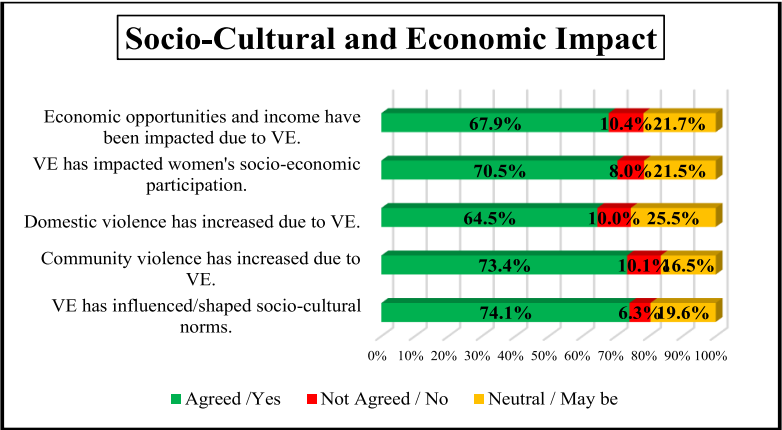

Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact

	Agreed /Yes	Not Agreed / No	Neutral / May be
Economic opportunities and income have been impacted due to VE.	67.9%	10.4%	21.7%
VE has impacted women's socio-economic participation.	70.5%	8.0%	21.5%
Domestic violence has increased due to VE.	64.5%	10.0%	25.5%
Community violence has increased due to VE.	73.4%	10.1%	16.5%
VE has influenced/shaped socio-cultural norms.	74.1%	6.3%	19.6%

Figure 3: Results of Questions about Socio-cultural and Economic Impact

The survey results align with the literature review, as 74.1 percent of respondents believe that sociocultural norms shaped by extremism have a noticeable impact on depriving women of their full participation. The rise of VE has led to a substantial increase in violence within the community as perceived by 73.4 percent of respondents. Furthermore, 64.5 percent of study participants believe that VE has contributed to the rise in domestic violence against women. The presence of VE is perceived to contribute to the decrease in women's participation in socio-economic activities and the increase in their unemployment as responded by 70.5 percent of study participants. Additionally, 67.9 percent believe that VE adversely impacts women's access to economic opportunities, contributing to a decrease in

society's income. Gender inequalities and oppressive atmosphere aggravate economic hardships for women in Peshawar.

Combating VE necessitates holistic approaches addressing deep-rooted multifaceted societal problems to foster gender equality and economic empowerment of women. Key steps to enhance gender equality include improving access to education and vocational training for women, microfinance opportunities, guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, creating safe spaces for women in public and work environments, and encouraging women's involvement in decision-making processes across all societal levels. Additionally, the role of social media and the active participation of women in policy and decision-making will be crucial in achieving these goals.

c) **Educational Challenges**

The educational domain for women is significantly disrupted due to VE, leading to interruptions in women's education and limited access to higher studies. The survey questions, addressing the impact of VE on women's education and access to resources, reveal significant concerns within the community.
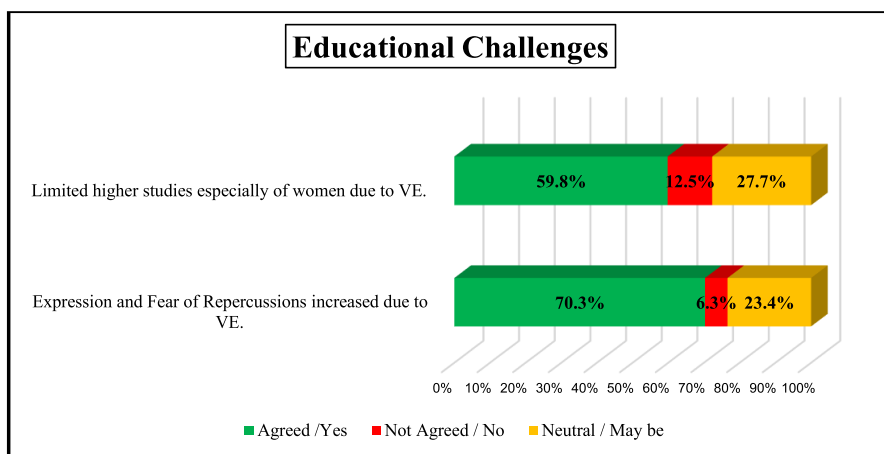
Figure 4: Results of Questions about Educational Challenges

Around 70.3 percent of respondents believe that VE contributes to disruptions in women's education, underscoring a widespread perception of its negative impact. Regarding challenges in pursuing higher studies by women, 59.8 percent asserted that VE significantly restricts access of women to higher education. The overall responses indicate that women's education requires targeted interventions such as enhancing education access to women by providing a safe and secure environment, promoting cultural sensitization through community awareness campaigns, providing scholarships, integrating peace education in curricula, and leveraging technology to expand access to learning opportunities.

d)   Health and Safety Concerns

VE poses notable challenges to women's health and safety within affected communities. It leads to difficulties for women in accessing essential healthcare services further aggravating their health issues.

Moreover, women in these communities express fear and concern about their safety due to the pervasive impact of VE.
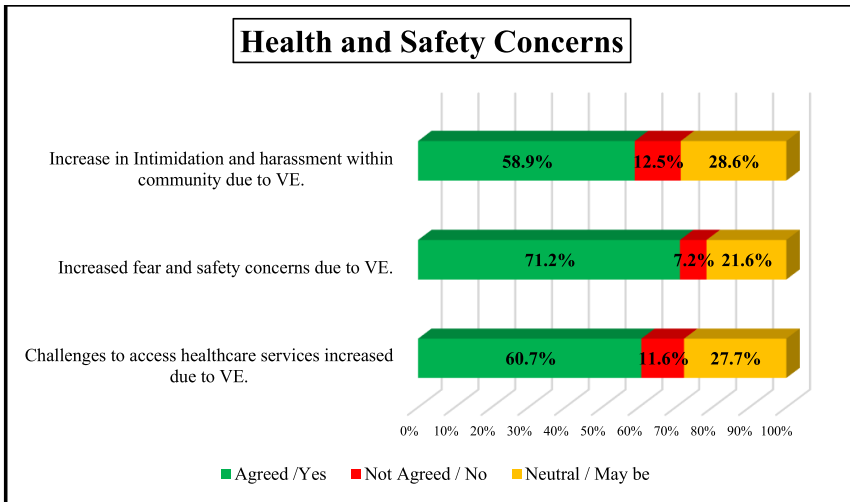

Figure 5: Results of Questions about Health and Safety Concerns

A significant (60.7 percent) number of respondents acknowledged that VE contributes to challenges faced by women to access healthcare services. Similarly, a majority (71.2 percent) of study participants expressed their concerns regarding the safety of women due VE. Moreover, 58.9 percent of respondents were of the opinion that VE contributes to the intimidation and harassment of women. These results highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies and targeted interventions to address the health and safety related challenges faced by women. To improve healthcare access, establishing mobile health clinics, telemedicine services, and increasing female healthcare providers is considered essential. Additionally, to enhance safety and reduce intimidation and harassment, it is crucial to strengthen the legal framework, women's safety patrol, public

awareness on gender-based violence, self-defense training program, and establish an accessible and swift reporting system to protect women.

e)   Social Restrictions and Community Dynamics

VE severely restricts women's social interactions and personal freedoms, limiting their right to self-expression and opinions. Media access and community interactions are restricted, and gender-based violence increases, threatening women's safety and national security by disrupting communities and encouraging radical views. In urban areas, VE makes it difficult for women to find jobs and access public spaces, while their movement and clothing choices are tightly determined by patriarchal structures in the society. This marginalization makes them more likely to be recruited by extremist groups who capitalize on their alienation and isolation.
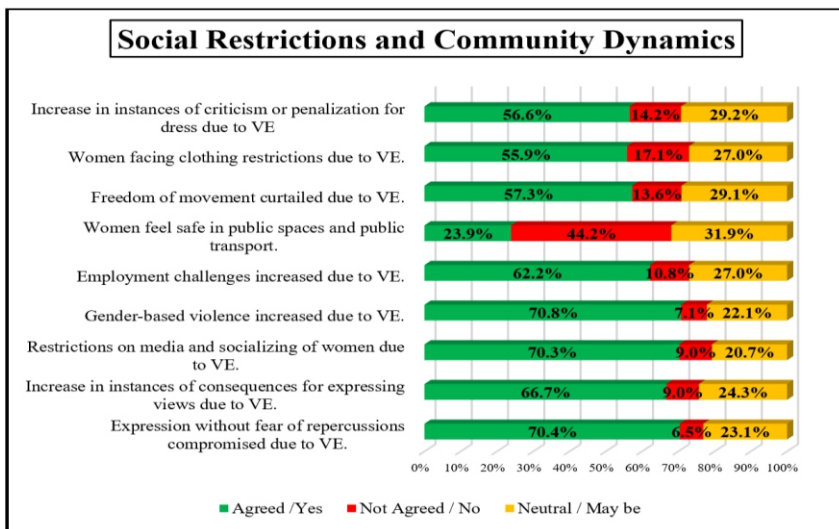

Figure 6: Results of Questions about Social Restrictions and Community Dynamics

The survey findings confirm that the freedom of women to express themselves without fear of repercussions is significantly compromised in the regions experiencing VE as confirmed by 70.4 percent of respondents. Additionally, 66.7 percent of study participants reported that women face consequences for expressing their views due to VE. Moreover, the majority (70.3 percent) of participants believe that women in the community are restricted in their access to media content and face socializing limitations due to the influence of VE. A large number (70.8 percent) of participants believe that there is a significant increase in gender-based violence in the community due to VE. Furthermore, 62.2 percent of participants believe that women face challenges in accessing employment opportunities due to the influence of VE. Regarding safety concerns, 44.2 percent reported that women do not feel safe using public transportation and public spaces compared to 23.9 percent of participants who do feel safe. Moreover, 57.3 percent of respondents believe that women's freedom of movement gets curtailed by VE. Regarding the choice of clothing, 55.9 percent of participants think that women in their community face restrictions in their choices and 56.6 percent reported instances where individuals were criticized or penalized for their dress in public spaces. A comprehensive strategy is needed to address social restrictions on women and promotion of their inclusion as integral members of society. This strategy should target underlying patriarchal beliefs and behaviors and develop effective alternate narratives that can help displace societal discrimination against women. All such initiatives are not going to be possible without active women participation.

f)   Government and Community Engagement

The government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and communities are main players in providing support mechanisms for countering VE. The survey included three questions to provide insights into perceptions of effectiveness of government and community/NGOs based support mechanisms. About 51.8 percent of participants reported presence of some form of support mechanism by the government to counter gender-based violence in VE environment as compared to 17.3 percent of participants who reported the absence of such mechanism in their areas. A lesser number (30.4 percent) of participants believed that the Government is putting in efforts to counter VE compared to 41.1 percent of participants who think otherwise. Regarding NGOs/community-based efforts to counter VE, 52.2 percent of participants expressed satisfaction compared to 23% who expressed dissatisfaction.
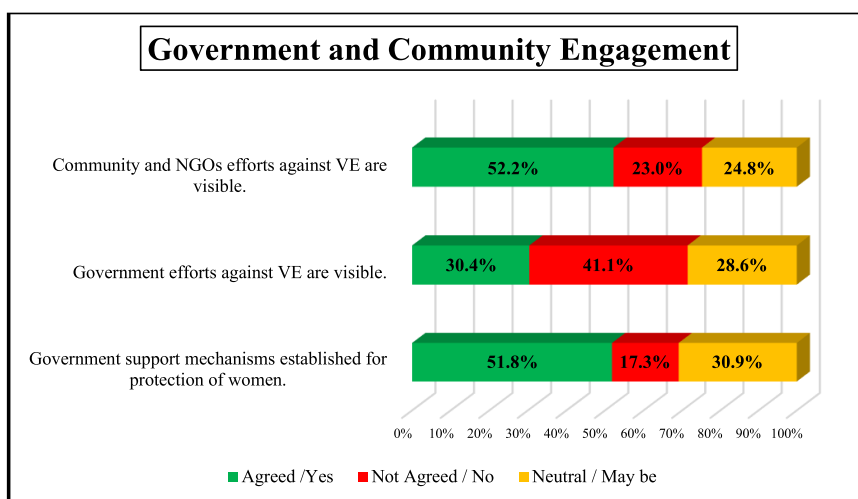

Figure 7: Results of Questions about Government and Community Engagement

These findings emphasize raising awareness of support mechanisms, addressing scepticism about government efforts, and fostering collaboration between authorities and community/NGOs for a more effective PVE strategy.

Understanding the root causes of VE is crucial for developing effective security policies that align with ground realities and public perceptions. Survey results reveal that while the government and relevant authorities have established support mechanisms and laws to protect affected women, their active involvement in preventing and countering VE is limited compared to the efforts of communities and NGOs. Bridging the gap between state-identified causes and public views especially those of women is essential to ensure that policies are comprehensive and relevant. Enhanced collaboration between government agencies, community members, and NGOs is vital for a more effective approach to preventing VE in the society.

6. Recommendations:

This research underscores the importance of integrating the perspectives of Pakistani women into policy-making to create a more secure, stable, and prosperous nation. Empowering women in peacebuilding and recognizing their potential as agents of stability is essential for successful prevention of violent extremism. Pakistan's counter-terrorism mechanism, while conceptually robust, often falters due to a lack of consistency, insufficient proactive measures and challenges in implementation. PVE policy must adopt a holistic approach, emphasize collaboration across all societal sectors to foster social cohesion and a resilient society.

Figure 8: Integrated Resilience Framework

The research recommends an "Integrated Resilience Framework (IRF)" with a holistic approach to CVE (Figure 8). The framework's holistic foundation lies in its ability to integrate various layers, namely, social, institutional, behavioral, and ideological—incorporating structural, societal, and individual levels into a cohesive and unified strategy. It acknowledges that resilience cannot be built through isolated interventions but requires synchronized efforts across social, institutional, behavioral, and ideological domains. This interconnected perspective offers a nuanced understanding of how extremist ideology and recruitment thrive in environments plagued by socio-economic disenfranchisement, systemic inequalities, and ideological vulnerabilities. By addressing these root causes simultaneously, the IRF aims to foster more sustainable and long-term resilience against violent extremism. It proposes two main approaches: i) Social and Institutional, ii) Behavioral and Ideological.

Social and Institutional approach focus on addressing the broader systemic and structural factors that contribute to VE. Key strategies to empower women include promoting gender equality by establishing women empowerment

centers offering vocational training, legal assistance, psychological support, and safe public and workspaces. Women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making at all levels is crucial to foster inclusive societies and preventing VE**.** Promoting good governance through women's participatory initiatives to enhance transparency and citizen engagement and healthcare access by establishing mobile clinics, expanding telemedicine and increasing female healthcare providers. Providing adequate funding for scholarships and mentorships programs with skill-building workshops and digital literacy training for young women and integrating VE awareness into school curricula to promote critical thinking and peaceful coexistence. By ensuring women have equal rights and opportunities, the framework seeks to build public trust, reduce vulnerabilities, and prevent the exploitation and recruitment of marginalized women by extremist groups.

While systemic interventions are crucial, the IRF also recognizes the engagement of individuals at the behavioral and ideological levels to counter beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that drive VE. Key strategies involve direct interventions aimed at changing mindsets and countering the ideological underpinnings of extremism through the development of positive narratives, implementing de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs that address both the psychological and socio-economic needs of radicalized individuals while fostering their reintegration into society and collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, communities, and social media platforms to align policies with public perception- particularly women. These efforts are supported by local media campaigns, digital literacy workshops and engagement of cultural and religious leaders to ensure that messages resonate with communities. A critical feature of the IRF is its focus on regular evaluations and adaptability, achieved through resilience committees comprising diverse stakeholders and the use of feedback tools, such as

surveys, for real-time assessments and data-time insights for effectiveness**.** By integrating both systemic and behavioral strategies, the framework ensures that interventions are holistic, addressing not only the symptoms but also the root causes of VE.

6. Conclusion

The socio-economic impact of VE on women in Peshawar poses a significant threat to national security by destabilizing communities, fostering conditions for radicalization, straining government resources, and undermining social cohesion. As women face marginalization and economic disenfranchisement, they become more vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups-a critical and often understudied perspective in Pakistan. This not only weakens societal structures but also perpetuates cycle of extremism, challenging the state's ability to maintain long-term stability and achieve development goals.

A gender-focused approach is crucial for countering extremism, emphasizing the need for interventions to enhance social cohesion and empower women. Promoting gender equality through education and socio-economic initiatives is essential to address the drivers of extremism and gender-based discrimination in largely patriarchal societies like Peshawar specifically and Pakistan generally. Women's empowerment in this regard is crucial and it helps build more resilient and cohesive communities, making it harder for extremist ideologies to take root.

The suggested Integrated Response Framework (IRF) is a promising way forward to reduce the impact of VE on women which can be achieved by promoting societal resilience through community engagement and trust-building. Pakistani women have always played a pivotal role in the country's progress and

development. If actively involved in countering VE, they will undoubtedly contribute significantly to countering extremism and supporting post-violence rehabilitation. Therefore, understanding the root causes of VE is imperative for developing effective security policies. However, these root causes must align with the ground realities and the perceptions of the affected individuals. Often, there is a gap between what the state identifies as the causes of extremism and what the public believes to be the underlying issues. Addressing this gap is vital to ensure that security policies are not only comprehensive but also relevant, implementable and reflective of public aspirations.